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## THE "BLACK HAND" MYTH.

BY GAETANO D'AMATO, FORMER PRESIDENT OF THE UNITED ITALIAN SOCIETIES.

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It is not strange, perhaps, that most Americans believe that a terrible organization named the "Black Hand Society" exists in Italy, and is sending its members to establish branches for the purpose of plundering the United States, since nearly every newspaper in the country conveys that impression to its readers. One would think, however, that such men as Frank P. Sargent, Commissioner-General of Immigration, and Terence V. Powderly, Chief of the Division of Information of that Bureau, would inform themselves on a matter that pertains so closely to their duties. Nevertheless, both of these officials have put themselves on record as believing that such an organization exists. In his last annual report Mr. Sargent says, apropos of the suggestion that legislation be adopted requiring the presentation of a passport as a prerequisite to the examination of an alien applying for admission to the United States: "The current history of the perpetration of heinous crimes throughout the United States by foreigners domiciled therein, especially by the members of the 'Black Hand' and other like societies in evidence," etc. Again, in a recent article on "Undesirable Citizens," he refers to "the introduction into this free country of such hideous and terrifying fruits of long-continued oppression as the 'Black Hand' and anarchist societies."

Mr. Powderly is more specific. In an interview in the New York "Sun," he declared that he had learned in Italy last summer that "on its native heath the 'Black Hand' was organized for good," explaining further: "An Italian who wrongs a woman, and fails to right the wrong, is practically driven from among his fellows. The black hand of ostracism is raised against him.

The 'Black Hand' in this country, brought into being for noble purposes across the sea, was prostituted and converted to ignoble purposes when transplanted to the United States." The "Black Hand" has scarcely even been heard of in Italy. It was never heard of until long after the term had been used in the United States, and then only as a distant manifestation of criminal activity regrettable because the good name of the Italians in the New World suffered by it. A society for the protection of women would be superfluous in Italy.

The name "Black Hand" is of Spanish origin, and the organization to which it referred was first described in 1889 by Major Arthur G. F. Griffiths, the English criminologist, in his work "Mysteries of Police and Crime." He wrote:

"Not so very long since a wide-spread organization for evil was brought to light in Spain—the Society of the Black Hand, as it was called. In its origin, it consisted of missionaries who hoped to redress the balance between rich and poor; but it soon drew down to it many desperadoes who gladly accepted the openings it offered for carrying on their original trade. It became a very extensive and numerous society, existing in the provinces, each having its own centre and out branches, with a total of affiliated members exceeding 40,000."

In the United States, the "Black Hand Society" is a myth, in so far as the phrase conveys the impression that an organization of Italian criminals exists in America, or that the Camorra or the Mafia has become naturalized here. By reason of the laxity of the immigration laws, there have crept into this country some thousands of ex-convicts from Naples, Sicily and Calabria, along with millions of honest and industrious Italians; and, owing to the inefficiency of the police in various cities where these Italians are domiciled, the criminals among them are able to live by robbery and extortion, frequently accompanied by murder, their victims being the more helpless of their fellow countrymen.

These fugitives from justice and gallows-birds, from whom it is America's duty to protect the law-abiding Italians who are doing yeoman service in the building of the Republic, are members of the Italian race that have brought disgrace upon the others, and upon whom the sensational press has conferred the title of "Black Hand Society." How many of these criminals there are in the United States it is impossible, for obvious reasons, to estimate with any degree of accuracy. Lieutenant Petrosino, who is in charge of the little Italian Squad in the Police De-

partment of New York and probably knows more about the predatory brotherhood than any one else, says that they may number as many as from three to four per cent. of the Italian population. They are no more organized, however, than are the many thousands of lawbreakers of other nationalities in America. Indeed, Robert Louis Stevenson's playful but accurate characterization of the gangs of thieves that preyed upon nocturnal Paris three and a half centuries ago applies to the so-called "Black Hand" to-day—"independent malefactors, socially intimate, and occasionally joining together for some serious operation, just as modern stock-jobbers form a syndicate for an important loan."

Italian outlaws are enabled to reach this country to-day with almost the same facility as the honest Italian, so far as the laws of the United States are concerned. True, the ex-convict cannot obtain a passport from the Italian Government and sail on an Italian ship, but there is nothing to prevent his crossing the frontier and leaving from any port outside of Italy to which he may make his way. Many of the most dangerous of the Italian criminals in the United States have come here by way of England and Canada, and many others have shipped as sailors from Italian ports and deserted their ships on reaching this country.

The Neapolitan, Sicilian or Calabrian desperado, once he has reached these shores, finds the conditions ideal for levying tribute upon the feebler folk among his countrymen. In nearly all the larger cities, particularly of the East and Middle West, he will find them living in colonies by themselves. Besides the 500,000 Italians in New York, there are 100,000 each in Boston and Philadelphia; 70,000 each in San Francisco and New Orleans; 60,000 in Chicago; 25,000 each in Denver and Pittsburg; and 20,000 in Baltimore. In smaller cities are colonies that will number from 5,000 to 10,000.

Conditions are much the same in these colonies all over the country. They are generally located in a poor quarter of the town, which is not policed as well as those where the native American lives. The newcomers, moreover, are timid in their strange surroundings; they are ignorant of the law of the land; few of them can speak English, even if they dared to complain of outrages perpetrated upon them. And, when the humble and respectable Italians do appeal to the police and find that the law cannot, or will not, protect them, they are reduced to a pitiful

extremity that has driven scores of potential citizens back to Italy, kept many an industrious resident in actual bondage to the lawbreakers, and in some instances even forced hitherto honest men to become criminals themselves.

Aside from the urban Italians, there are some 500,000 laborers of the race distributed throughout the United States, working in mines and vineyards and on railroads, irrigation ditches and farms, who are equally victims of their rapacious countrymen with the dwellers in cities. In fact, there is scarcely a point throughout the length and breadth of the country where a few Italians are gathered together that some criminals of the race have not fastened themselves upon them.

Every reader of the newspapers is familiar with the outrages that, in the name of the "Black Hand," have been perpetrated among the Italians, beginning some ten years ago and increasing coincidentally with the Italian immigration, but reaching a limit two or three years ago. Murder has been a common crime, and the dynamiting of houses and shops, the kidnapping of children, with every species of blackmail and extortion, was of so frequent occurrence that the mind became dulled to the enormity of these offences. In New York conditions have been worse than anywhere else; and yet, with half a million of Italians in the population, there are to-day only forty Italians in the Police Department. Along miles of street in New York there are no guardians of the people who understand the language of the residents. As Marion Crawford says, the employment of Irish policemen in Rome would be an analogous circumstance, since there are more Italians in New York than in the capital of Italy.

How little the police have understood the situation may be gathered from the fact that, during the height of the wave of Italian crime three years ago, respectable members of that race were not allowed permits to carry weapons of defence, even when their lives were threatened. Physicians whose nocturnal duties subjected them to particular peril; bankers and business men, at any time liable to the attentions of scoundrels who did not stop at murder; in fact, all persons with Italian names were prohibited absolutely from carrying arms. Wherefore the police aided and abetted the outlaws, all of whom carried knives and pistols, by making it impossible for the law-abiding Italian legally to prepare for defence in case of attack.

During twenty-nine years of residence in New York, I have found two causes that operate for the blackening of the Italian name in respect of crime: the sensationalism of the yellow press and the ignorance and recklessness of the police in recording arrests. Almost every dark-skinned European, not speaking English, who does not wear the Turkish fez, is put down on the police records as an Italian, and thus the Italian is condemned for much of the crime committed here by persons of other nationalities.

It is impossible to comprehend the attitude of a part of the American press with regard to the Italian, unless the theory is accepted that the truth is a consideration secondary to the publication of sensations that are calculated to increase the day's sales. Last spring, for instance, the newspapers manufactured a "Black Hand" scare, representing that the police were in despair of getting the lawless element under control. Two of the less sensational of the Sunday supplements had articles on the same day devoted to the subject, in each of which it was stated that an organization of Italian criminals under the name of the "Black Hand Society" existed in New York, and that it was growing in power so rapidly as to be an actual menace to the city.

One monthly magazine even published an alarmist article, actually signed with the name of Petrosino, the chief of the Italian Squad of the Police Department, entitled "Italian Mafia Has New York by the Throat," expressing views not held by the detective, who had never even heard of the article until it was shown to him in print. As a matter of fact, any reporter or writer who had made enquiries of Petrosino would have been informed that he was more encouraged than ever before to believe that he was at that very time bringing the Italian criminals under control.

A cruel bit of journalistic work that actually brought about fatal results came under my personal observation just after the assassination of King Humbert of Italy, in 1900, by the Italian anarchist Bresci, who had lived in Paterson up to a short time before the crime was committed. Newspaper reporters were swarming to New Jersey at that time, and one of them caught sight, in a barber shop in Hoboken, of the photograph of a well-known Italian merchant named Bianchetti, taken as he was saying farewell to some friends on board a steamer about to sail for Europe. The proprietor of the shop jokingly told this reporter

that the man in the photograph was Bresci, whereupon the news-seeker bought it. I personally informed him that the photograph was that of a highly respected citizen of Hoboken and I gave his name. Nevertheless, the picture was published in a New York newspaper that afternoon, and afterward copied in the Italian newspapers, not only in America, but in Italy, the result being that many of Bianchetti's acquaintances, in the Mother Country as well as in the United States, believed that he was in some way involved in the assassination of the King. He died of a broken heart within a year.

The term "Black Hand" was first used in this country about ten years ago, probably by some Italian desperado who had heard of the exploits of the Spanish society, and considered the combination of words to be high-sounding and terror-inspiring. One or two crimes committed under the symbol gave it a vogue among the rapacious brotherhood; and, as it looked well and attracted attention in their headlines, the newspapers finally applied it to all crimes committed by the Italian banditti in the United States. Thus the press not only facilitates the commission of crime among the Italian ex-convicts, by making it appear that all the evil done by them is the successful work of a single organization, that aids the individual criminal by leading his ignorant countrymen, upon whom he preys, to believe that he makes his lawless demands on behalf of a powerful society.

In spite of the depredations of the thousands of Italian criminals whom this Government has allowed to enter the country and prey upon the honest and industrious of their own race here, the great body of that race has prospered. A quarter of a century ago, there were not more than 25,000 Italians in America, and their entire possessions would have been valued at a trifling sum. To-day, in New York alone, the estimated material value of the property in the Italian colonies is \$120,000,000, aside from \$100,000,000 invested by Italians in wholesale commerce, \$50,000,000 in real estate, and \$20,000,000 on deposit in the banks. I doubt whether any other nationality can show as good a record of twenty-five years of achievement.

Of the Italian as a good citizen, a valuable member of society, I may not write, but perhaps I may be allowed to quote the opinion of an American of Anglo-Saxon descent, James J. Starrow, of Boston. Mr. Starrow writes:

"I believe the average Italian immigrant in physique the superior of the native New-Englander, and what other consideration is of more importance to us, or more surely lies at the base of a strong and vigorous race? The love of family is strong among Italians. What is more fundamental than this? The whole structure of modern civilization is based on the family group. If this goes to pieces, what matters it what the form of our Government may be? Can the native population point to any superlatively superior record in this respect? While the Italians consume a good deal of light wine, and occasionally too much, yet they are on the whole a very temperate race. The Italian drunkard hardly exists. Most important of all, the Italian women do not get drunk. The Italian seems to have a natural courtesy, which is not a mere surface indication, but, I think, springs, as all true courtesy does, from a certain affability of soul and regard for others."

In the United States, as everywhere, the Italian women are notably domestic. They are attached to home and family, and that tie they never break. They are never heard of in the divorce courts, and the President is not compelled to scold them about race suicide. Petrosino tells me that he has never seen an Italian woman "on the streets" in New York.

In the domestic life the Italian woman is at her best. She is a true helpmeet to her husband; she works hard to help him, and saves for him, as, I think I may say, no woman of any other race does. It is due to her that the Italians in this country are growing so rapidly in wealth. It is due to her that the name of Italy is not associated with any suggestion of social vice in the Western World. While she retains her Old World ways she brings up her children as good and sound Americans, inculcating upon their minds the principles of thrift and economy which she herself learned in Italy.

Immigration into this country now averages about 100,000 per month the year round. Of these newcomers one in every five is from Southern Italy; and, as I have said, criminals are still coming in. The investigation made in Europe last summer by the Congressional Immigration Commission that reports to the present Congress ought to result in a law deporting all foreign ex-convicts in the United States, who cannot prove that they are making an honest livelihood, and establishing some form of consular inspection on the other side to prevent any more of the criminal class from entering.

GAETANO D'AMATO.